



# THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

---

Year 2008

Article 8

---

1-1-2008

## Growing Out of Pamlico

Desiree M. Koser

Gettysburg College, dmkoser@cnav.gettysburg.edu

Class of 2008

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>

 Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Koser, Desiree M. (2015) "Growing Out of Pamlico," *The Mercury*: Year 2008, Article 8.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2008/iss1/8>

This open access nonfiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# Growing Out of Pamlico

**Keywords**

creative writing, non-fiction

**Author Bio**

Desiree Koser is a senior English major but her interests are varied. She has studied Japanese, German, computer science, women's studies, education, art, writing, and more. She likes to think of herself as a sponge absorbing knowledge. At heart, though, she is a crafter. Sewing, painting, jewelry making, paper crafting (greeting cards, book binding), and cooking are her passions. Her other passion is her long-time love, Mario; without his support and encouragement she wouldn't be the person she has become. She aspires to one day complete a book-length memoir of her childhood spent in rural North Carolina.

## Growing Out of Pamlico

As I stand in line at my Giant grocery store, the one in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, I survey the items riding along the conveyor belt: Giant brand baby carrots, Giant cereal-ohs, Giant margarine, Giant frozen pizza, Giant cranberry juice, and Giant chicken breasts. Satisfied, I hand the cashier my Bonus savings card before she can ask for it and I reflect on how Giant makes everything I need. I'm a tightwad wary of anything that costs more than a dollar; for those items, I make myself aware of palatable prices. For instance, the sale price of boneless skinless chicken breasts is no more than \$1.99 per pound and I stubbornly refuse to pay more than that. Occasionally, I even find them for less at the Butcher Block Meat Market fifteen minutes away down Biglerville Road. I buy store brand products because I won't pay for unnecessary advertising and packaging. Cheapness is at the core of my being but it's really not a surprising idiosyncrasy.

Our playthings were pinecones, broken sticks, little wild onion weeds, suspicious berries, fuchsia flowers and furry azalea bushes.

Going to the grocery store was often the highlight of my week as a child because my family lived in the middle of nowhere. We had no real neighbors; we were surrounded by water and subsequently mosquitoes. My bus ride to school took at least an hour. Every Sunday we would ride for twenty minutes to the Food Lion, our closest grocery store. I loved it because it meant getting out of the house and observing (but not interacting with) other people. I would patiently follow my parents as together we perused the aisles. They didn't pick Food Lion brand products (they don't pick store brand products now, either). I imagine they thought the least they could do was buy decent food (assuming the store brand to be inferior). At the magazine rack, I would check for the next installment of *Cat Woman*, the comic book devoted to the feline villain of Gotham City. I bought comics with money I occasionally earned from my grandmother by doing small chores like collecting pine cones (a penny a piece) and dusting her house (\$5 for the whole job). My addiction to office supplies (which has no starting point in my mind) would draw me indefinitely to the half-aisle of pens and notebooks over which I would pore.

The Food Lion was in a small shopping center recently constructed that had a CVS, Dairy Queen, Subway, Chinese restaurant, video rental store, and a Dollar General at the end. These stores were newcomers to us, exotic in the desolate coastal North Carolina county of Pamlico. While my parents shopped, I would sometimes walk down to the Dollar General to check out their office supplies. Their pencil-top erasers were extra-soft – the best erasers ever! I would walk through the aisles and think about the things I would buy if I had more than just a dollar. Oddly enough, not much in a Dollar General actually costs just one dollar. In that sense, it's nearly identical to Family Dollar. I don't know how many

non-poor people know of Family Dollar, but it was infamous in Pamlico as an indicator of poverty. Kids would insult you by saying your mama bought your shoes from Family Dollar. Good “mamas” put shoes on layaway for Christmas.

My mother hardly shopped at Family Dollar and in fact I don’t recall shopping for clothes until I was in junior high. I suppose my mother bought me clothes, but it must have been at times that I didn’t accompany her. Nearly everything I wore came from my grandmother’s thrift-store pickings. My wardrobe was a rainbow of neon colors (which I loved). On the weekends, I would often spend the night at her house and she would take me out to yard sales very early on Saturday mornings. If there were clothes for sale, she would be engaged indefinitely, checking for pants that fit my Aunt Mary or toys for my younger brother Nick. If there were curtains, though, there would be no hope for extricating her from the heap. She already had closets and windows full of identical curtains, all the same dingy color from the endless stream of cigarette smoke that trailed from her thin lips. Weekly, she visited the Salvation Army in New Bern to pilfer through their stock of clothes and drapes.

What’s funny is Granny had plenty of money back then (at least as compared to the rest of the family). I guess it was ten years before my family moved to North Carolina that Granny and Grand Pop had sold their Maryland home. They made an arrangement with the buyer so that he could make payments personally over the course of maybe 20 years. This extra monthly cash was what allowed Granny to spend copiously on her grandchildren (copious being relative to the situation – Christmas presents were often stuffed animals and other toys purchased from the Salvation Army). Her tenacity in squeezing the most out of her dollar showed that she was, and remains to this day, a woman molded by the Depression.

New Bern was the closest major city to our marshy county (we identified ourselves by county and not by town since the distinction was really quite pointless). New Bern is a fairly major city for the coastal North Carolina area; I’ve even met people who have heard of it. The drive, from what was my neck of Pamlico County, takes almost an hour yet New Bern is both a necessity and everyone’s favorite destination. It has a (“Super”) Wal-Mart, a (new) Target, a (pathetic) mall, a (shabby) movie theater, restaurants (that I never ate at), and many other places of commerce (that I never visited).

When we couldn’t afford the gas to go on a Saturday trip to New Bern, which was usually the case, my family and often my Aunt Mary and her daughters Megan and Tia would convene at Granny’s house. At the time, Granny’s just seemed like a really fun place to spend a Saturday, but now I realize that it was (and still is) the hub of the family. Granny would often prepare large, appropriately Southern meals so going to her house would always entail a delicious dinner. My favorite was Salisbury steak. Not the kind made out of ground beef (hamburgers and gravy), but out of cuts of meat. The breaded beef would fall apart under my fork as I scooped them up with a bite of rice drenched in gravy. A trip to Granny’s provided necessary nourishment. Even if she didn’t cook, she always had plenty to eat: turkey lunchmeat, pound cake from Food Lion, leftover ham, Pillsbury blueberry biscuits a day old and tasting stale, and packets of jam and ketchup from

Hardee's. Sometimes there would be an apple pie on the counter or steamed crabs piled up on a Styrofoam tray the beef cuts had been sold on. Granny's double-wide was a model of opulence.

As a child, I knew my family had little money. I was reminded of it frequently (like at Christmas time) and I accepted it wholeheartedly. That was my identity: poor. I carried it like a badge of courage and can't ever remember being angry or embarrassed about it. My whole family was and still is poor. I'm the first one to go to a college that doesn't have the word "community" in the name and still, not much of my family has gone there either. Before Pamlico, when I was very young, my mother had small jobs (she worked for Mr. Donuts) and my father made good money doing manual labor far away from home. We moved to North Carolina to be near Granny, not realizing that the economy of Pamlico County was stagnant – a cesspool that would suck you down till you had nothing left except Pamlico. To leave that place was one of the hardest things (financially) my family did. Most of our belongings were heaped on our front lawn in a month-long yard sale. Our final night in Pamlico we all slept on the floor of the empty living room since our mattresses were in the undersized U-Haul. I couldn't sleep because I was so excited to be leaving Pamlico, to be leaving North Carolina. I wouldn't have to go to Pamlico County High School after all.

Being poor made for an interesting life. I may not have had cable television, an experience I wouldn't know until I was sixteen, or a fancy Super Nintendo gaming system like my best friend Elizabeth Morgan had, but I had my imagination, a muscle that was extensively trained through my childhood experiences. (I'm one of the few people I know who doesn't have an attention deficiency.) My brother Nick and I along with our many cousins shared in lots of imaginative games that required few props. When visiting Granny, we children would be exiled to the outdoors for entertainment—we were rarely allowed to play inside. Granny's kitchen work and sanity would be at risk by our presence in the house. The exact band of children would change, but my brother and I frequently played with our cousins Megan and Tia. When I was very young, my older cousin Bo (I found out later that her name is actually Margaret) and her brother J.R. would play with us. Bo would play her favorite game with me: "Survival." We pretended that we were on a cruise ship (the porch) that sank and we had to swim (via the porch steps) to an island (the yard). The essence of the game was to find food and shelter on the deserted island. Once, when Bo was collecting much-needed sticks, she mistook a snake for a brown-colored limb and almost picked up the reptile. I don't think we played "Survival" after that.

Our playthings were pinecones, broken sticks, little wild onion weeds, suspicious berries, fuchsia flowers, and furry azalea bushes. Granny lived on the river—actually, on the river's edge—and we would sometimes collect little mussels from rocks that buttressed the property against the tide. We would break the dark bearded things open and mash up the yellow insides in oyster shells according to an original recipe. They were then imaginarily eaten, of course. At dusk, we would play hide and go seek – a game most improved by the limitations of darkness and the fullness of azalea bushes. Their leaves are poisonous, you know.

I'm not sure what we would have done without the river since it provided

everyone—children and adults alike—with something to do. Granny was an avid fisher and her favorite tackle was simple: a long bamboo pole with a length of cotton string, a red and white bobber, weight, and a hook. She always used shrimp as bait. She showed me how to break the pungent white flesh into pieces and carefully skewer them so that the fish can't just suck the tasty bits off the hook. You have to leave the shell on to further complicate the fish's attempts.

We kids loved to be on the pier, a massive wooden structure constructed by the men of the family that stretched like a giant capital letter T off of Granny's property. The bleached wood was hot but smooth on our feet (we were invariably bare-foot). Granny would sometimes leave bits of shrimp lying out, waiting to be hooked; they would become dry, rubbery, sticking to the boards. You would have to peel the shrimp from the pier. We would catch jellyfish in our net and lay them out to dry, too. They were our nemeses and we were weeding out the menacing red jellies (whose sting was allegedly more potent than the regular white jellies). They would end up like the shrimp, gooey and dehydrated—a gross pool of glossy clear jelly, no longer recognizable. We didn't have to worry about stepping on them; jellyfish tentacles can't sting the bottoms of your feet. If Granny was out fishing she would inevitably shoo us off the pier because our noise was scaring all the fish away. I think they weren't there to begin with.

If Granny wasn't fishing, she might put us to work. We were experts at catching crabs. We never used crab pots, those basket cubes that are baited and left in the water to lure their many-legged prey. We did it by hand and I was always in charge since I was the oldest of all the cousins (Bo and JR had long since moved away with their father). Sometimes the crabs would cling to the sides of the pylons underwater and we could scoop them up from there, but to get a decent "mess," you needed bait that was more efficient than shrimp. Granny would buy a package of turkey necks and tie each one to a long string (the same kind that she used on her fishing poles). The other end of the string she would tie to a pylon of the pier and let the neck sink into the murky water. Like that, the string would hang straight down by the weight of the fleshy neck. If an interested crab pulled and picked at the neck, the string would go taut at an angle and that's how we knew it was time; I did the honors. I would slide a wooden-handled net into the water off to the side so as to not disturb the feasting crab. With one hand, I would carefully inch the turkey neck up to the surface. The crab would be hanging onto the neck and when it got close enough that I could see him through the translucent green, I would swoop the net under him quick and there! one more crab added to the bucket. We never checked the size of the crabs – there was never a question of legality in our minds. It was our part of the river. You didn't need a license to fish, either. The concept of paying for the privilege to fish still boggles my mind.

At the end of the day, we would present Granny with our catch. With anticipation, we watched her pour the frothing crustaceans into a giant pot over the stove and cover them with a blanket of Old Bay. After an entire day of pacing back and forth between turkey-neck lures under the beating sun, we couldn't wait to break open the steaming red shells. And every time Granny did the same thing: gave us one or two crabs each and told us, "The rest are for crab cakes!" What an injustice to our hard labor. Crab cakes were for the adults and besides, they didn't



taste in any way as delectable as the crabs themselves. Granny used too much filler. At a young age, we were experts at “picking” crabs, deft with the requisite tools: wooden hammer and butter knife. The most important tool was our hands, though. The shell shards would slice our fingers and the spicy Old Bay would sting but we didn’t care. Fresh steamed crabs are one of the few joys I miss from North Carolina—they’re too damn expensive in Gettysburg.

The river provided us with tasty things to eat but it also offered us our absolute favorite thing to do during the hot, thickly humid summers: swim. The water was green and brown and weird little bits of mud swirled around in it. The water concealed lumpy large rocks that were scattered on the river’s bottom (they could have been chunks of concrete) and the razor-like edges could (and frequently did) slice the bottoms of our feet. Slick brown things like snakes and skates (a creature akin to sting rays) sometimes swam on the surface of the river. The skates, which were apparently harmless, would swim in a diamond pattern reminiscent of geese. For many reasons, the adults would have to be entreated to watch over us (I don’t blame them for refusing so often—who would want to sit in the heat and watch kids splash in the water?).

We loved to swim. We raced, we climbed the pier, we shouted, we splashed, we dodged the pylons. We would dig our toes into the sand and collect tiny clams (we never ate those and I don’t know why). The horse flies were a problem: they would buzz around your wet face and sting you. They were huge, pestering insects and the only escape from them was a dive underwater. We would open our eyes and see specks of green and yellow swirling around, reflections of light bouncing off of sand particles. We could see each other, too, and grab a leg or pinch an arm. I never saw our arch-enemy the jellyfish face-to-face, though.

Before the hurricanes came one summer and swept them away, jellyfish floated rampantly in the river. We had to clothe ourselves accordingly; long-sleeves were a necessity but Granny’s stock-pile of used clothing didn’t always have the right size and it was hard to convince yourself before getting stung that long sleeves in August were a good idea. I got stung a lot. If I close my eyes, I can feel the sinister wet yarn wrap around my arm or brush against my leg and the stinging burn left in its place. We were willing to risk the pain—which was remedied immediately with mucky river sand and later with baking soda, both suggestions of Granny’s—as a relief from the thick moist North Carolina heat.

In my home—a shack, really, which was owned by my grandparents—escape from the humidity was not as easy. We had one air conditioner perched in the living room window and it made so much noise when it clicked on that I had to crank up the volume on PBS. It was always more interesting than the programs on network television. In the evenings, our nuclear family would watch nature shows about African animals and *The Frugal Gourmet* (The Food Network is my favorite channel now).

My mother came up with the barrel idea. My father had a couple of big black metal barrels that he used to burn our trash in and my brother Nick and I filled a clean one with water under the shade of a thick gum tree. My mother laughed at us as we stood in the barrel, relishing the reprieve brought by the cool water, imagining we were in a pool (a luxury). As a child, the situation

seemed completely logical and absolutely fun; I'm sure it was as absurd as it was a sharp indicator of our simple life. How did my mother feel, seeing her children pretending to swim in a barrel? She had been accepted to Parsons School of Design, she could have been a savvy fashion designer living in New York. But instead, she was a wife and a mother and she took on the challenge that was Pamlico. We used what we had in order to get along, to survive. Being poor takes a certain resiliency and resourcefulness – or at least those qualities make poverty more tolerable. An unlimited supply of free crabs also helped.

I don't think Food Lion sold crabs. That was a commodity purchased on the side of the road, from a troller, or from your brother's friend. Food Lion now looks so diminutive compared to my massive Giant. Returning to Pamlico is a melancholic experience. The aisles are small. There are only two cashiers. Everyone moves slowly. The produce section is not nearly as expansive as I once thought it was. There aren't any comic books anymore.

Granny had to move away from the river. For all the joy it gave us, the river was not to be underestimated. It rose, I was told, past the bulkhead of Granny's property, onto the lawn, up under her second-hand Cadillac, up to the door of her home (which was probably six feet off the ground). Granny had to buy a new house (a different house) and when I visit her now, I don't feel the warmth I used to. She misses fishing. This "new" house is old and moldy. (The house by the river was probably moldy too, but that's not what I remember about it). The bathroom houses a pungent odor of urine (no one cleans it for Granny) and when I take a shower, I'm afraid the tub will fall through the floor because it sags under the weight of my feet. I try not to stand in the middle of the tub where it feels the softest. Even though all of Granny's familiar thrift store knickknacks clutter the limited space and dingy drapes hang in the windows, the house is foreign.

The monthly payments ended a few years ago and now Granny is just as poor as the rest of my family. Well, Bo isn't so poor anymore. A couple years ago she completed the second half of her four-year nursing degree at the University of North Carolina (the first half was undertaken at Pamlico Community College). She doesn't make as much money as my mom does here in Gettysburg, even though they're both Registered Nurses (and my mom went for the less prestigious two year program at Harrisburg Area Community College). But that's how Pamlico County is – once you're there, it's hard to get out. People make just enough money to pay their bills and fill their gas tank up so they can drive to New Bern and use their credit cards. I hope Bo moves.

Maybe it's not true to say poor *was* my identity. I think I still carry it around with me—that no matter what I accomplish in life, I will always be poor at heart. I don't feel like it has changed yet, but surely "poor" will have to go. Am I not safe in thinking that I won't end up poor even after being the first in my family to attend a four-year college? I haven't yet shed my badge and that's why I am proud of my \$1.99 per pound boneless skinless chicken breasts. I get to satisfy my boyfriend with easy to cut and eat chicken because he doesn't like to suck the meat off the bone like Granny showed me.

"We got those in today. We don't steam 'em here, a place in Maryland



does it. They're steamed with Old Bay." I look politely at the lady behind the lobster tank who is busy explaining the virtues of the blue crabs bagged up in groups of ten in the cold case in front of me. (I learned later in life that the crabs I had eaten for years were "blue" crabs and that there are many other varieties of crab, like the long red ones at Chinese restaurants.) The Giant fishmonger continues, "They're a dollar a piece." I maintain my façade of polite interest but on the inside I cringe. A dollar *a piece* is a hefty price. I can't pay money for something I used to catch for free – especially when you have to work so hard to get to the little bit of meat inside them.

"Hmmm." I nod in feigned curiosity. "I'll keep these in mind." I guess there will never be Giant brand crabs.

Sometimes I forget about Pamlico. I go weeks, even months, forgetting that eleven years of my life were spent barefoot and mosquito-bitten. When I visited Granny five months ago, I couldn't bear the July humidity. How did I ever survive down there? Following Granny to Pamlico had not been the best idea. But being away from her means no Salisbury steak, no fishing, and no yard-saling. Pamlico was financial suicide, but Pamlico gave me a tight-knit extended family that I had to leave behind. I tell my mother that had we stayed there, I would have killed myself, but living there shaped me into the person I am today. I may be cheap, but I pay my cell phone bill (from the cheapest carrier I could find) two weeks before the due date.